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Postmodernism & Its Discontents

WHAT CAN A FORMER SOVIET STATES PUBLIC SCULPTURE TEACH US ABOUT KITSCH?

05/06/2018 Michael Eden Art



In postmodernism Kitsch is a potent force, its marketable, its witheringly ironic and it reinvigorates things that are considered bad with a strange vitality, but what is it? Kitsch is the result of the levelling of high and low culture and the destabilising effects of postmodernism's undermining of elitism. If we appreciate something ironically what does that actually mean? Could there be something more authentic lurking in the husk of Darth Vader that betrays the sympathies of artist Alex Milov?

Protected by a pop culture shield Lenin waits to return to a plinth in Ukraine and may say something about Milov's core beliefs (or a tendency to hedge bets) but in our strange time how do we know which version to take seriously Vader(The west pop culture) or Lenin? (A longing for the old Soviet Union)



Lenin statue survives the de-communisation laws under a Vader shaped shell (Ukraine)

There may be some insight if we look at another example of Milov's work 'Love' speaking of that public work commissioned for a 'Burning Man' event the inner form appears to be the important element,

"It demonstrates a conflict between a man and a woman as well as the outer and inner expression of human nature. Their inner selves are executed in the form of transparent children, who are holding out their hands through the grating. As it's getting dark (night falls) the children start to shine. This shining is a symbol of purity and sincerity that brings people together and gives a chance of making up when the dark time arrives," Alex Milov, 2015



'Love' Sculpture by Alexander Milov,

To really understand the implications of Lenin's pop culture sarcophagus we need to double take the statue and try to escape the sense of triumphalism regarding a simple soft culture victory for western capitalism over the old soviet union. A greater understanding of kitsch might help with this.

Kitsch

In art and craft the effect of the destabilising plurality of postmodernism is a levelling of high and low culture, the traditional boundaries between say popular culture and high art have weakened and the results can be confusing. The idea of good taste and bad taste are blurred by irony. Traditionally 'High Culture' (good taste) consisted of things like: painting, sculpture, literature, classical music, opera, theatre, philosophy, history and so on. These things were considered 'classic' and represented what had earned a place in 'the canon' of a given civilisation according to its eternal qualities. Good taste requires that a person is properly educated to appreciate some of the finer more nuanced aspects of the the given art form.

In bad taste or 'Low Culture' there are popular phenomena such as: pop music, game shows, trash novels, magazines, celebrity, fashion, blockbusters, reality TV and so on; associated with the fad those forms of culture don't require a special initiation and have immediate mass appeal.

Kitsch emerges when these clear territories blur and break, cross overs (Hybrids) come into being which combine features of both high and low culture such as: The Matrix, Jerry Springer the Opera, Pop Art, The Comedy Panel show and so on. These things on the one hand can be/are inane yet also commonly explore complex social issues. These hybrids though aren't strictly Kitsch. Kitsch is not combining anything it is simply something bad, which is appreciated because of its low, or bad qualities ironically often combined with nostalgia.

Appreciating something for its kitsch qualities is controversial; what is the difference between watching reality TV ironically and simply watching it? and what constitutes the ironic distance doesn't seem to change the outcome that we just consumed something bad.

Milov may have marred Lenin with the shell or he might have saved the icon for a more sympathetic future.

I Find your Lack of Faith Disturbing!

The line above is spoken memorably by the fictional Sith lord, Darth Vader as he uses his psychic powers to choke an irritating empire mandarin; it might have been uttered by Lenin the non-fictional real life revolutionary leader of the Soviet Union had he lived to see his own image encased in a titanium replica of Vader in Odessa,

"In April 2015, Ukraine formally passed a controversial package of "decommunization" laws requiring, among other things, the removal of communist monuments. However, for one particular Lenin statue in Odessa, a Ukrainian artist had other ideas. Located in an old factory courtyard on the outskirts of the port city, the statue was scheduled for demolition until Alexander Milov — a local artist whose work was featured at Burning Man in 2015 — proposed a different solution: encasing the existing Lenin statue within a new titanium facade, creating the world's first monument to Darth Vader," [www.atlasobscura.com](http://www.atlasobscura.com)



The statue of Lenin is replaced by Darth Vader 2015

The passing of the 'decommunization' laws are surely an attempt for Ukraine to distance its self from what many there see as a former occupying state; however the choice of Vader by artist Alexander Milov is kitsch to say the least, probably an ironic commentary on Soviet rule or the laws themselves? and could be a cynical cash in. Whatever the message its is a highly postmodern move, replacing something serious and real with something fictional and popular,

"We are gathering all these statues – like Lenin – and we would like to make a park of forlorn heroes of the epoch...I want to take the statues out of the central squares of cities and put them in a different place like Disneyland, where they can be visited. It seems to me that if these statues are destroyed, people coming after us will have no possibility to make conclusions for themselves as to whether people needed them or not," Alexander Milov 2015

The thought of a Disneyland style 'Soviet' park would have horrified Lenin but in our strange time this tactic appears to be a rites of survival for the artist, and while the history of statues of the old Soviet heroes may recall the heady days of the end of history (post the fall of the Berlin Wall) we should be cautious, the artists motivations are unclear,

"Ideally, he says, he would keep the statues as they are," Fiona Macdonald BBC 2015

and Ukraine is annexed by the former head of the KGB!

The End, of The End of History

Just when it seemed to some that western liberal capitalism had totally won and represented the best of all worlds,

"What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government," Francis Fukuyama 1992

Fukuyama espoused this argument in his book, 'The End of History and the Last Man' 1992 it summed up a feeling of triumphalism and inevitability that many intellectuals shared and would now like to forget, in short, because it was wrong. Although free market capitalism and liberal democracy had made headway into every continent and dominated relations around the world; and despite the economic and military power of America appearing unassailable in the 1990's this was to come to an abrupt end with what we can call the return of history.



Attack on the World Trade Centre September 11, 2001

The twin towers attack didn't represent an immediate threat to American military power or to the American way of life but it did represent a touchable America and the breaking of an illusion; that being, the idea that the world was ready to embrace liberal democracy as the only show in town. Coca Cola, Hollywood movies and the rule of law was not going turn the rest of the globe into America minor,

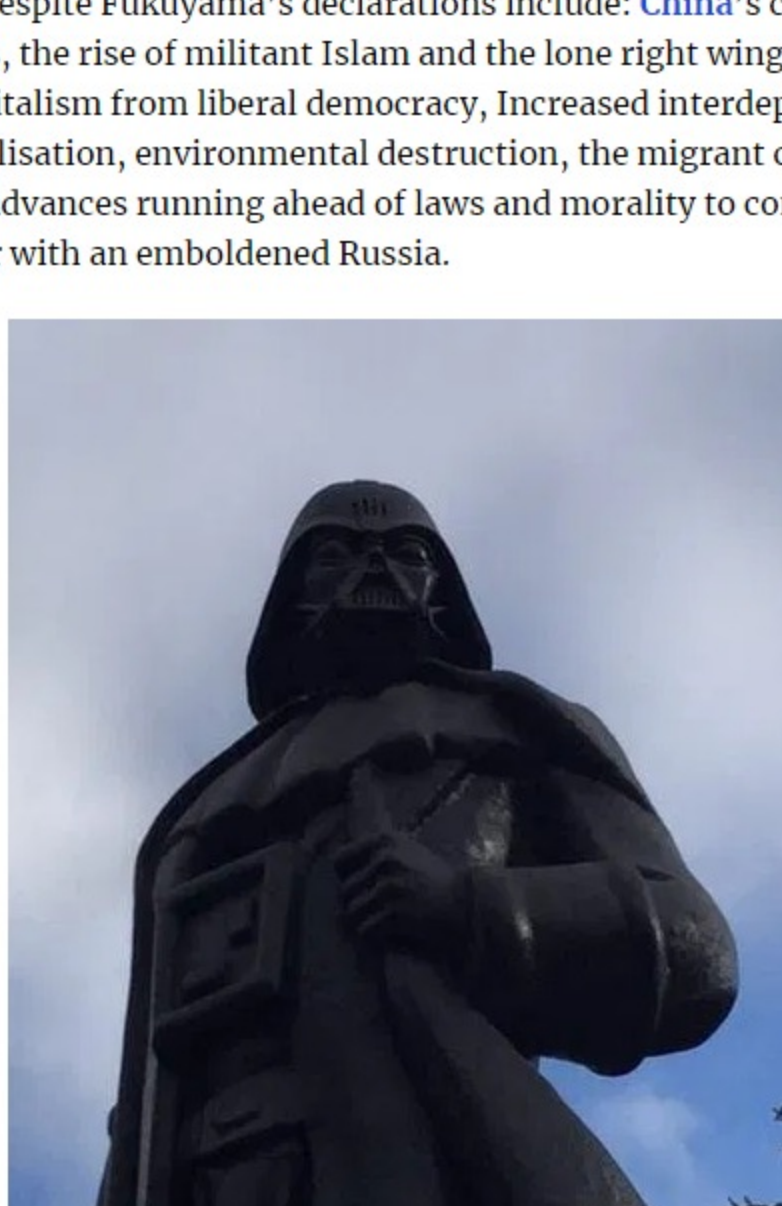
In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history. I can feel in myself, and see in others around me, a powerful nostalgia for the time when history existed," Francis Fukuyama 1989

Thinking of Fukuyama's quote above its difficult to imagine seeing the world through that lens, since 1989 nothing could be further from the truth; his words are almost as depressing as the upsets that have dogged the post-modern epoch. Neither Fukuyama's stale utopia or our current situation is much of an improvement on Modernism although dubiously war has for the most part been avoided or carried out by proxy abroad (affecting professional soldiers and foreign publics).

Ukraine has certainly not seen an 'end to history' or a stabilisation of the political scene and the Vader monument has more Machiavellian level under the Kitsch surface; Erik Herron reporting in the [Washington Post](http://Washington Post) gives a deeper and all to familiar reading,

"The recently dedicated Vader monument and other antics are designed as a diversion. While election fraud was occurring on the streets and in the electoral commissions of Odessa, the world was instead paying attention to the oddly charming Vader story. I too was seduced by it. I posted video of a Vader event on Twitter and visited the now-famous statue... Star Wars "news" from Ukraine requires a second, deeper look. It can be an amusing anecdote about the worldwide appeal of Star Wars and a way to drive traffic to websites...But it's a trap. Vader's appearance in Odessa is probably not a joke, although it follows a familiar plot line: a power-hungry would-be emperor using back-door machinations and diversions to help engineer an illegitimate victory and deprive citizens of free and fair elections. Only this time it's not in a movie, but in Ukraine," Erik Herron 2015

The mechanisation's of power can include the use of irony and kitsch! Other issues which persisted despite Fukuyama's declarations include: China's continued economic success, the rise of militant Islam and the lone right wing fanatic, the separation of capitalism from liberal democracy, Increased interdependence on other economies, globalisation, environmental destruction, the migrant crisis, science/medical advances running ahead of laws and morality to contain them and of course, proxy war with an emboldened Russia.

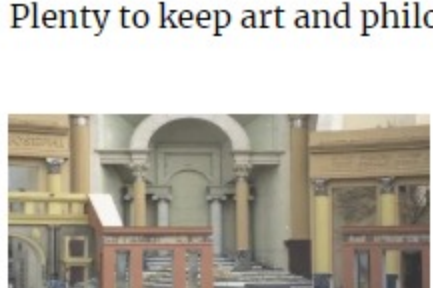


What does this represent ?(statue detail)


Milov's Vader- Lenin is a result of the colliding attitudes and sidestepping strategies of post- modernism and also stands for a strange defiance to the tendency to deny or obliterate recent history sweeping modern democracies.

Is it better to survive in a shell that mocks your legacy? does Milov care about Lenin's core ideas? should we wreak all our old statues?

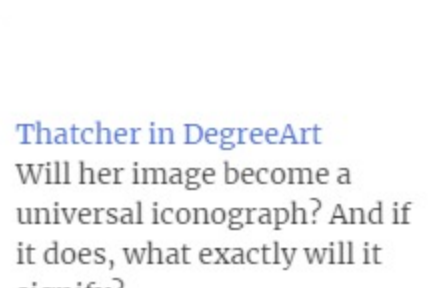
Plenty to keep art and philosophy busy for some time yet!



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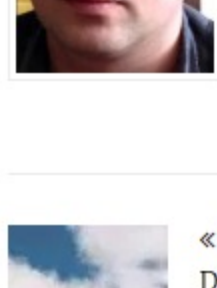
ALEXANDER MILOV

ART

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA

POSTMODERNISM

PUBLIC SCULPTURE



About Michael Eden > 77 Articles

Michael Eden is the Arts Editor for Trebuchet Magazine, an artist and researcher working in London and the south east, his artistic practice is concentrated on painting and he divides his time between this and lecturing in art history and contextual studies.

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